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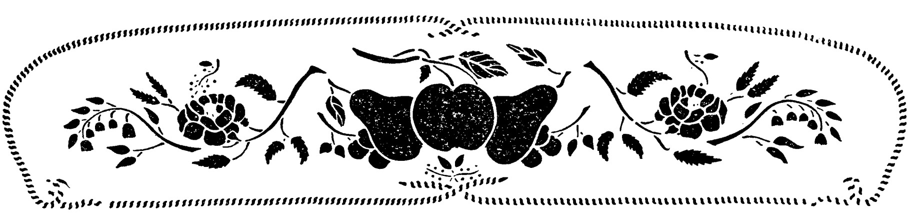


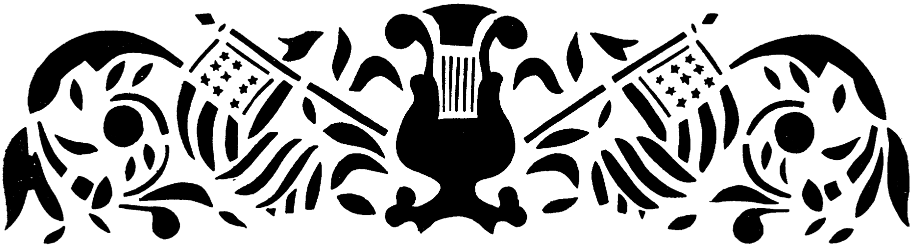
Early Nineteenth Century Chair Stencils

THROUGH the kindness of Mr. Carl P. Rollins, the Museum has been able to place on special exhibition a collection of cut paper stencils used in the first half of the last century at the Dyke Mill in Montague, Massachusetts. This mill was originally founded as a factory where furniture of an inexpensive grade was manufactured for the trade among the farmers and villagers of southern New England. By far the largest number of designs in this collection are by their shape limited to the decoration of chairs, from which we may gather that this was the mill's chief product. In any case there seems to have been a large demand for stenciled furniture at this time, and the mill was apparently prosperous. When the popularity of this type of furniture declined, the mill was given up, and the stencils which had been used were stored away, and were not found until a few years ago, when the building was adapted to the uses of a printing plant.

The collection amounts to about 250 separate pieces, though a number of the designs are in duplicate. Upon many traces of the original colors used in the painting are to be distinguished about the edges of the pattern. They are all, of course, hand cut; some crudely in the pages of old account books or magazines, others delicately with fine interlacing leaves and foliage in carefully oiled paper. Of special interest are the designs by which from their shape we can distinguish the form of the chair on which they were applied. The illustration at the top of this page (Fig. 1) is clearly illustrative of this type. It is adapted to the flat top rail of a simple Windsor chair, the conventional rope border following the shaped edge, and the enclosed space filled in with the design of fruit and foliage. This flat rail was connected to the seat by means of a "fence" of upright dowels, which in turn were decorated, possibly, with the stencil shown in figure 2, one print being placed at the top pointing down, a second at the bottom pointing up. The remnants of color of the top piece

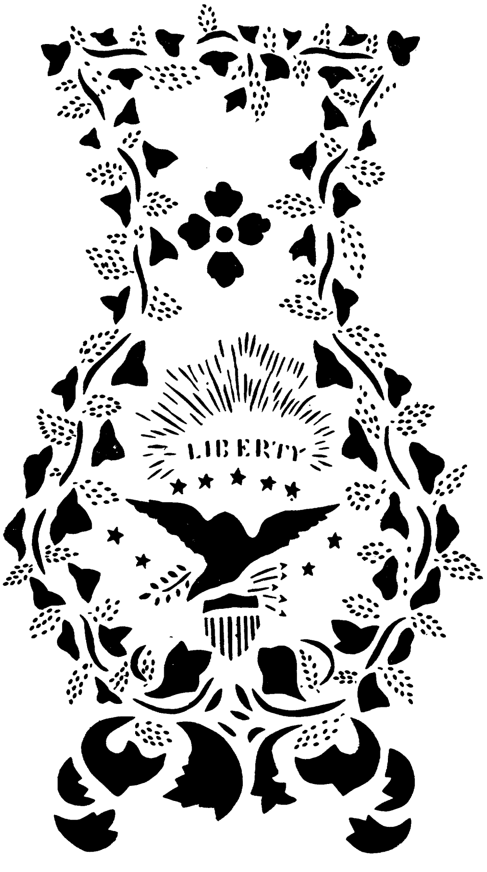
(Fig. 1), red on the fruit, green on the foliage, and the rope border black—enable us to conceive the gay appearance of the finished chair.

The American flag design, reproduced in figure 3, is an interesting pattern. It was a motive popular among all the craftsmen of this country in the early part of the nineteenth century; we find it on carved and moulded mantles, on wallpaper, on chintzes, and embroidered on samplers, and to find it now in chair-stencils is gratifying, if not surprising. That this particular design was very popular among the customers of the mill we may deduce from the fact that in the collection their are four well-worn copies. A second flamboyantly patriotic example is that of the American eagle perched upon a shield, surmounted by the word "liberty" in a burst of light. From its shape it was obviously used for the wide flat splat, and though its effectiveness might have been increased by vivid coloring, it was apparently applied in black.



The vigorous stage-coach pattern shown in figure 4 could be adapted to many pieces of furniture. In many ways it is the most attractive, as it is the most original example in the collection. The distinct sense of motion expressed by few bold strokes stamps the craftsman who cut this stencil an artist; one feels the appreciation of the limits of the medium, with high effectiveness developed within these limits.

By far the largest number of the designs are derived



from flower and leaf motives. The dove, however, appears in many patterns, and shells, fountains, trees, shields, and even a Turkish hound, are represented. Then there are scores of smaller geometrical figures, such as those used for putting on dots or lines of squares. Though, as a whole, the designs are of little tangible use as copy material for modern students, the collection makes up a most interesting contribution to the history of early American craftsmanship.

H. H. F. J.